

WHAT HAPPENS *ONLINE*

Books by Nathanael Lessor

Steady for This

King of Nothing

What Happens Online

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1

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For Imelda, the smallest person but my biggest influence

1

THE STRUGGLE IS REAL

Afternoon registration, the worst of times. Everyone's hopped up on fizzy drinks, man are all sweaty from football, and after all the screaming and chatting and gossiping and running around for an hour, we're forced back into the classroom. What's even the point in afternoon registration? I'm already sat here, suffering my way through the day, is that not torture enough? Now we have to relive a register that's already been done this morning. They're checking to make sure we're still here, that we haven't busted out like a prison break. But the school gate is huge, unguarded. If we wanted to leave, a register isn't much of a deterrent. If this *was* a prison, most of us would be cooked already, me included. Me *definitely* included – I wouldn't survive a minute behind

the wall. And I wouldn't even be able to blame it on allergies.

'Fred.'

I hate going to people's houses because of allergies. Aunts, uncles, family friends, I never know if they've got pets. I get low-level anxiety every time we go anywhere. And what if they're a 'shoes off' house, and my feet are beefing, and everyone just sits there politely ignoring it, even though their eyes are watering and it's putting people off their Jaffa cakes?

'Fred.'

Boff, I can always shower more when I'm older. Sometimes I think about what I'll look like when I grow up. Like, what if I stay the same height as I am now? I know it's unlikely, but what if? I guess I'd spend less money on clothes, I wouldn't ever grow out of them. And being smaller means a single paracetamol will work faster on me.

'Fred, this is the third time I've called your name.' Mr Albert's eyes are fixed on me, irritated, and the whole class has turned to look at me. My worst nightmare.

Quick, stop sweating. I tell myself. Resist the urge to cry, you're not a crier. You're a doer. You put your head down, and you get on with it. None of this is helpful.

Mr Albert is waiting impatiently. 'You know how the register works, we've been doing it every day for three

years. I call your name, you answer.'

There are a few sniggers from the class, Clare is rolling her eyes and Zuki calls me a joke-man. Ah, the familiar chipping away at my soul, more scars on top of deep scars, but that's my future therapist's problem.

'Fred, are you here?' Mr Albert asks again.

Of course I'm here, you're staring right at me, you're talking to me, I think we've established that I'm present. I'm not the ghost of Ronald McDonald, or a nuanced female DC character, I actually exist, and I'm sitting right in front of you. But maybe I'm as invisible to Mr Albert as I am to everyone else.

'Here, sir,' I answer quietly. So feeble.

I hear more laughing, and I sink lower into my chair. My insides are burning with shame.

This is almost as bad as the time I drew myself as a superhero in Year Seven, and Jackson showed it to everyone in class. It was so embarrassing, and I was so helpless to stop it. I just had to sit there and pretend I couldn't hear them laughing at me. Now, two years later, even the form teacher's trampling my self-esteem. This level of inferiority must be how chickens feel when watching a falcon migration, like, one has talons and can soar, the other is very likely to end up in a bargain bucket. Allow being a useless, flightless bird, and super-allow being in afternoon registration.

Think, change subject, get your mind off it. What was I thinking about before Mr Albert figuratively RKO'd me outta nowhere?

Right, I was in my feelings about the possibility of staying this short for the rest of my life. Like, I'll never know the top shelf of a supermarket, and I'll get nervous every time my future wife wants to wear heels. She'd look at them longingly, but she'd know how uncomfortable they make me because she's so much taller than I am. But I won't want to ruin her big night, and she should wear whatever she wants to wear. It's my problem, my insecurity. Maybe I could just stand several metres in front of her, and use that forced perspective from *Lord of the Rings* . . .

Someone makes a loud fart noise with the back of their hand, and everyone starts laughing again. Mr Albert tells them to grow up and finishes the register.

'Jamie.'

'Here, sir.'

'Chloe.'

'Here.'

'Jackson. Jackson. Jackson?'

'Yeah.'

'I shouldn't have to call your name out more than once,' Mr Albert says but carries on.

Funny how no one sniggers at Jackson. Doublest of

double standards. Standards squared, you might say. I hate this school.

‘Now, where was I? Zukora.’

‘Present.’

‘And lastly, Clare.’

I brace myself.

‘Yes, sir,’ Clare answers. My stomach sizzles whenever I hear her voice, I wish it didn’t. It’s like some weird emotional gag reflex. Even though she looks right through me like everyone else, she smells like cocoa butter, and her shampoo and conditioner are doing the lord’s work. Dream team out here. There was that time she said ‘eww’ when she got paired with me in science though. I pretended not to notice.

Clare’s part of the popular group. Every year has one. And they’re never popular because of their kindness, it’s never like ‘hey, those man are so cool, they must be really good listeners’. No, it’s just about whoever’s loudest and most horrible to people they don’t see as on their level.

I tell myself that popularity is as meaningless as wearing perfume for a Zoom call, or watching Channel 5, or rocking a sleeveless body warmer. Why would anyone want cold arms and a warm torso? And anyway, popularity isn’t a currency, it’s not something tangible that you can take with you into later life, not like gaming credits or GCSEs. I don’t think future employers will look

at someone's CV and be like 'yeah, you had perceived riz in Year Nine, that means you're now qualified to be a structural engineer'. But I dunno, maybe I'm just salty because I'm kind of a punching bag around here. And I can't exactly fight the system – the rules of social hierarchy aren't formally explained, they're just followed.

Anyway, I call those kids the Unthinkables. Clare goes out with Dayo, who's probably the most aggressively boring of the bunch. He thinks he's the riz-master general, when he's more like general anaesthetic. Once on a school trip he put an ice cream in my hood and pulled it over my head. This how you know the guy's a wasteman: no originality in his methods. It would've been slightly better if I was lactose-intolerant, at least that would've made the joke multilayered. Or if it had been a Mr Whippy instead of a Solero, and I'd had to walk around with whipped cream in my hair until I found a sink. But no, all he did was give me extra laundry to do, and I would've had to wash that hoodie at some point anyway. Some boring guy, bruv.

Then there's Jackson. He's built different – he's my supervillain origin story waiting to happen. Last year he stole a photo of my nan that I keep in my pocket, and refused to give it back unless I sang for him. When I did, he just laughed and crumpled it up. I didn't tell him that Mamoune had recently passed away and that photo

meant everything to me, he didn't deserve to know that information. And it wouldn't have made a difference anyway.

Ola sits somewhere in between – she's not as basic as Dayo or as disturbing as Jackson. I feel like she only hates me by association, she looks at me the same way iPhone users look at house guests who ask for a USB-C charger. I feel around in my pocket for my own iPhone, the 400BC. I haven't received a call or a text this calendar year. And we're in June.

Zukora, or 'Zuki' for short, is their ringleader. He's got the teachers in his pocket because he banters with them about football, but behind the scenes he's a menace. When Mum bought me brogues, those dead church shoes with the tiny dotted holes in them, Zuki started the chant 'Grandaddy shoooooooooes' in the corridor. It caught on like wildfire. He even got Year Sevens saying it to me, and they should never be that brave. If I cussed out a Year Eleven's footwear, it'd take a team of surgeons eight hours and four Red Bulls to remove my grandad shoes from my lower intestine. The flappy part of my sole would be talking to my colon like they're close friends.

I named those guys the Unthinkables because they only have five brain cells between them. No lie, Dayo thought vindaloo was wine from a toilet, and Jackson still thinks that electric scooters run on petrol. They're also

called the Unthinkables because it's unthinkable that I could ever be anything like them. I'd rather chew reaper chillis and lick my own eyeballs than sell my soul for the notion of popularity. OK, maybe not reapers, that's kind of extreme, but definitely something uncomfortable. Using sandpaper instead of toilet paper, something like that. Though sandpaper is used to smooth things out, I could end up with a glossy bottom, varnished and shiny like a stair banister. My glutes would finally be ready for the world.

Nah, chill, don't go down this road again. There's nothing wrong with my cakes, at least nothing that a couple thousand weighted squats can't fix. I watched this tutorial one time, and it messed up my algorithm for weeks, YouTube kept loudly selling me cream for private parts that definitely aren't part of my physiology. Luckily I wasn't in public when my phone shouted, 'Do you have an irritated bikini line?' but I was at the kitchen table and it made both my parents look up with concern. If that had happened at school, it would've easily added several months of bullying to my tab.

I'm not the only one in this school who has it rough though. There's this group who sit in a classroom at break and lunch under the watchful eye of a teacher who feels sorry for them.

The head of their little squad, James, tried to talk to

me once, and I was initially excited to have someone to chat to. But then ten minutes into the conversation, he started talking about how he's a floppy-eared boy, and he asked me to flop his ear. Then his friends joined us, and the real nightmare began. They referred to themselves as the Dark Defenders, and even drew this little DD logo on their hands with a biro. Then they all started flicking their earlobes, while I looked on in horror. I kept having to remind myself about beggars and choosers and whatnot, until a week later, when I noticed James sat in the school reception area. He was crying, all red and shaky, and he had his mum with him. It turns out, Jackson and Dayo put him in the giant wheelie bin behind the science block. They closed the lid and sat on it. His friends were pleading with Jackson to allow it, but Dayo grabbed them up and floored them if they got too close.

Jackson got suspended for a week, Dayo got three days. Zuki just got a bit of a grilling for not stopping it.

I never chilled with the Dark Defenders after that. It was a question of self-preservation, and we parted ways amicably. Unlike Jennifer Lopez and her cast of husbands. Jennifer Low Standards, more like.

Anyway, being lonesome isn't all bad – not having a crew makes me more inconspicuous. Which is just as well for when I'm spying on the Unthinkables. I try to be observant, keep tabs on what makes them popular,

like my own personal experiment. It started off as mild curiosity, using my powers of social invisibility to their full effect. People say the wildest stuff around me, because they don't fully register me as a human being with eyes and ears.

Like last week, I was in the library, and these two Year Elevens were sat at my table. One of them looked around to make sure no one was listening, and even though he clocked little old me three seats away, he told his friend about his secret butt tissue. He tears off tiny squares, and keeps it up there after using the toilet, because he's lactose intolerant and the tissue is soothing after he's just been. But then he gets blasted by his sister because it falls out when he's wearing shorts around the house. Now I get that I'm a total wallflower and whatnot, but the fact that he whispered that story with me in range means he didn't want people to know, but he didn't care that *I* could hear, because to him, and everyone else, I'm irrelevant. And that's the cursed gift of my life at St Marks.

That also applies to the Unthinkables. I'm so invisible, Ola and Clare say stuff around me that they'd never dare say in front of even Zuki and Dayo. About how much their feet stink after wearing tights for too long, or the infected belly-button piercing that Ola's self-conscious about, to the point where now I find it quite entertaining.

Kind of like a TV show. The problems happen when they break the fourth wall and see me, and that's when I have to keep my distance for a while. But I always end up going back for more.

Obviously my favourite character is Clare. She's popular, and pretty, and I don't mind that she thinks my name is Frank. People get my name wrong all the time in Starbucks. OK, fine, they don't, I don't even go to Starbucks, but that's not the point. I guess it doesn't matter that Clare doesn't know my name, most people don't. Outside of the obsessive class registers, nobody at school ever really says my name out loud. Like, at all. If my life was a movie, I wouldn't even be the main character. I'd be an extra, sipping coffee in the background, not speaking any lines.

Clare's obviously a main character. I just imagine her waking up every morning, her phone pinging away with well wishes and plans to meet up. In my mind, her bed sheets have her initials on them in giant letters, her neighbours all greeting her in some choreographed singsong as she dances down the street. *My* neighbours once threatened me with a wrench for glancing through their window. Thank god they didn't chase me, I have the top speed of a dying cat, dragging itself to safety after an accident.

Can't lie, I do sometimes daydream about talking

to her, behind the scenes special and that. But the very high chance of her laughing in my face, or telling the Unthinkables, turns that daydream into a realistic nightmare. Even now, the idea of walking over there, having all their eyes on me as I approach them, I wouldn't do it if you paid me. They'd fold me into a human pretzel, no seasoning, and frisbee me out the window. And nobody in class would bat an eyelid.

But what if it didn't go that way? What if I raised my stats beyond the basic bozo levels of a simple senpai and suddenly levelled up? I could do an infinite health cheat code like some sort of bully-proof armour. The energy beams coursing through me would radiate a blazing, flame-like aura; Zuki and Jackson could try throwing paper balls at me, but they'd just disintegrate on contact, like a comet entering Earth's atmosphere. The class would be stunned into silence as I shine with the light of a thousand glow-worms. OK, not glow-worms, something cooler. Glow sticks. What if emerald-green flames from my beams were reflected back at me from Clare's eyes as I made my way over there? What if my clenched jaw was enough to make her swoon into my arms and claim me on her socials? We could go mini-golfing on our first date and I'd pretend to let her win, although I'm actually genuinely rubbish. What if I was the kind of person who was able to say

any of this to anyone? What if I was the main character in my own story?

I'm interrupted by the bell that tells us to go to our last lesson of the day. I love that sound. It means I'm one step closer to the end of school. The phrase 'saved by the bell' goes through my mind seven or eight times a day. Most people think it's a boxing analogy, signifying the end of a round, but the origin is actually more gruesome than that. Back in the day, when it was kinda common for people to be accidentally buried alive, graveyards had a little bell on the coffins which people would ring by pulling a string inside if they woke up. Leaving this dusty classroom, I think both interpretations apply in my case. Can't believe it's only Monday.

As we all stumble out towards our history lesson, I start getting those happy nerves that mean it's almost time to go home. In the meantime, history isn't the *worst* lesson. I actually love the subject, but that said, St Mark's has this evil ability to sap the joy out of everything. I wanna have fun with it, I want to participate, but I also know the target on my back has space to grow. Always.

Mamoune used to say that a quiet mouth don't get fed, but in my experience a quiet mouth don't get picked on as much. My usual seat is at the back where it's safer, in the corner by the window, where I'm not in full view of thirty people sitting behind me. It's a delicate seating

arrangement; I can't be in front of the Unthinkables otherwise Zuki and Jackson just throw stuff at the back of my head, but they all congregate at the back too. So I have to sit alongside them, parallelogram, where I'm not in their direct line of vision. I race to my chair, quickly sit, and immediately put my head down. I resort to quietly studying the Victorians, keeping one eye on my surroundings and the other eye on the teacher.

I'm impressed by how much the Victorians achieved without WiFi and coffee. Like how they invented time as we know it with Greenwich Mean Time – before that all the clocks in the country said a different time. My mum's side of the family clearly missed that memo though – they still operate on 'African time', which is anywhere between two and five hours later than what was originally agreed.

As Miss Whiddett talks about how Queen Victoria wore black every day after her husband died, which I guess makes it easier to buy in bulk, I can't help but listen to Clare telling Ola about a girl in the year above us who claims to be Caribbean. Turns out Ola went round to her house and the parents were Nigerian. Man said they were eating jollof and yams, no rice and peas in sight. Fam, her name is Tolu Abinyemi. Seriously, she might as well be called Lagos McYoruba. Why the lie? How low is your self-esteem that you could deny

such rich heritage? That's before you add the cringe factor of pretending to be Caribbean, like, man went to carnival, shopping for fake ancestry and said 'yes, that one'. You're not Drake, you can't cosplay as a different ethnicity, out here treating her family tree like comic-con. Oh, Tolu, it would have been more believable if you said you were Wakandan.

Ola peers over at me then, and smiles.

Immediate panic settings, people don't smile at me. Sure, they laugh at me, but they never *smile* at me. You smile at dog walkers in the park, or neighbours you're familiar with, but you don't smile at *me*. She nudges Clare, who looks over at me too. OMG, did they clock I could hear them? What if they ask me about Tolu, will I give my honest take and finish some girl I barely know? No, it's one thing to think stuff, it's another thing to say it, I'm not here for anyone's downfall.

'Hey, Frank,' Ola calls over. My heart quickens.

'Yeah?' My throat's gone dry from barely talking all day. Side note, I once went eleven straight days at school only saying 'here, sir' or 'here, miss'. Probably the saddest record anyone's ever held. I don't think you could call it an accomplishment.

I repeat the mantra I've been chanting in my head for the last three years. *Don't engage more than is necessary.* I mean, these are the people who once took a close-up

picture of a spot that I had on the side of my head. They added a hero GIF and a caption that said 'super-gross'. The worst part is, I'm not even angry at the concept. Weaknesses include girls and Clearasil, and the main villain would be a dermatologist. If I was in on the joke, it could've been a funny afternoon discussion. Instead, they posted it online and taunted me for weeks. Well, they're not taunting me any more, they're smiling at me and engaging in conversation. Next thing you know, they'll be getting my name right. Fingers crossed.

'Frank, I beg you move your peanut head out the way, I'm tryna show Clare something outside.' Ola's voice is loud and aggressive, and for the second time this afternoon I come crashing down to Earth. Some kids snigger nearby and I hear 'peanut head' echoed round the class. I may be socially invisible, but I need to remember that my physical form is opaque. I lean back, and turn to see what they're looking at. Phillip Hu-Fong is strolling by the geography block, his tie all loose, high-tops glimmering in the sun.

'I don't know where he's going, but I wanna be where he's at,' Ola says, eyeing him up.

Eugh, OK, but what if he was at a funeral? Or in a shark tank? Or in the toilet with his knees up to his ears while last night's tacos come crashing out of him like Niagara Falls?

Ola bites her lip, and then girls both squeal. What the hell? He should really be in lessons, not strutting around like he's on a catwalk.

'I swear he's got a girlfriend.' Clare raises an eyebrow at Ola.

'Yeah, well, I heard he got with Danielle at Hakeem's party,' Ola says. Hold tight, it's always fun hearing about motives I'm not invited to. 'So they can't be that serious.' Yuck. I wonder if his girlfriend knows how unserious he thinks they are. Or that a load of kids in the year below are airing her laundry like it's everyone's business.

I have heard about Phillip Hu-Fong's reputation, from multiple sources now. As someone who sometimes eats lunch in the toilet cubicle, like in a tragic high-school movie scene, I'm privy to all sorts of gossip, pardon the pun. Once I heard a couple guys talking about how he lipsed three girls in one Valentine's Day, which is all fun and games until you're rubbing apple cider vinegar on your cold sores. I've even heard Hu-Fong in action myself, from my little hiding place at the top of the back stairs. He's the type of copy-paste pretty boy who pretends to be into star signs, lowers his voice to sound like an R & B artist, and always introduces himself with his first and last name like it's the most interesting thing about him. As if we don't all have names.

'His girlfriend's that one in Year Ten, right, the one

who's always got bare lipstick on her teeth? What do you think she'd do if she found out he was cheating on her?' Feels like a bit of a leading question from Ola. Poor girl's not even here to defend herself. Probably in a corner somewhere chomping on her lipstick.

Seriously, how did we get to this point, since when did disloyalty suddenly become attractive? This is how you know popularity is a myth: you can move this reckless and people still rate you.

I spend the rest of the lesson trying to put the peanut-head incident behind me. I've been called worse. 'Anchovy breath' was a particular low point, it came out of nowhere. Nobody wanted to sit near me, and Zuki kept getting laughs by loudly offering me chewing gum. I don't get it, I don't even like anchovies. I go back to my worksheet and count down the remaining minutes of class. I swear, even though Victorian students were segregated, caned and got moved to a workhouse if their parents died of typhoid, I'd still like to swap places, just for a day. Obviously I'm not comparing, I got running hot water and central heating, but there's a part of me that's not one hundred per cent convinced they had it worse.

The bell rings, and as we're packing our stuff away, I catch a snatch of conversation between Zuki and Dayo.

'Yo, what you doing after school?' Dayo asks.

‘Probably gonna go for a run. Need to get my stamina up for football,’ Zuki replies.

‘Running? Bro, I told you, you should try swimming. You get your stamina up, and you work the different muscle groups.’ How stimulating. ‘You know that running is just the same as walking but in fast forward.’ At this point, I have to hold in my laughter. That’s such a ridiculous take, it’s like saying a pat on the back is just hitting someone but in slow motion. But then Zuki says something I totally wasn’t expecting.

‘I might watch Existor, if he’s online.’

OK, this just got interesting.

‘Yeah, same,’ Dayo tells him, and I go a bit light-headed. Zuki and Dayo have great taste. Existor’s a gamer, quite a popular one, his live streams enjoyed and adored by lots of kids our age. ‘We should comment or DM him one of these days, you know how much clout that’s worth if he replies?’

‘I don’t know, man, I reckon he’s too big. I just watch him for the jokes, the guy’s a talent, still.’ Tbf, Existor is pretty funny, they’re not wrong. ‘If he ever breaks out into TV or anything, we can still say we knew him from his gaming days.’

Wow, I didn’t know these two knuckleheads were on it like that. Maybe we do have some things in common.